

# Multiculturalism as a Topic for an Adult Sunday School Class

Richard John Stinson

In 1997 I received the Doctor of Ministry degree from the San Francisco Theological Seminary with a focus on multiculturalism in society, and specifically, multiculturalism in the church. One of the projects for my dissertation was to design and implement an Adult Sunday School course on the topic of multiculturalism. The title: *Being Christian in a Multicultural Society and a Multicultural Church*. The course was designed especially for Melrose United Methodist Church, a predominantly Filipino congregation that I was serving as pastor at that time.

## Being Christian in a Multicultural Society and a Multicultural Church

### Course Syllabus

- |             |   |
|-------------|---|
| 1st Session | Understanding Multiculturalism<br>Defining Terms<br>Discussion of Pros and Cons   |
| 2nd Session | Understanding Prejudice and Racism<br>Defining Terms<br>Exploring our own attitudes<br>Questionnaire for Melrose UMC Congregation |
| 3rd Session | View video "The Color of Fear" and Discuss<br>(Or other video on multiculturalism, race or diversity)                             |

- 4th Session Visit other United Methodist Churches
- 5th Session Observations of church visits  
                   Sharing Experiences of Church Visits  
                   Case Studies: Multiculturalism and the United  
                   Methodist Church in Oakland
- 6th Session Bible Study  
                   Visions of Multiculturalism
- 7th Session Bible Study continued
- 8th Session Diversity Training  
                   Guest Speaker: Yuri Morita

We began each class celebrating our unity by singing the popular song, "They'll Know We Are Christians":

We are one in the Spirit  
 We are one in the Lord  
 We are one in the Spirit  
 We are one in the Lord  
 And we pray that all unity  
 May one day be restored  
 And they'll know we are Christians  
 By our love, by our love  
 And they'll know we are Christians  
 By our love.

To celebrate diversity I also suggest singing the folk song "All God's Critters" by Bill Stains.

All God's critters got a place in the choir.  
 Some sing lower; some sing higher  
 Some sing out loud on the telephone wire.

Some just clap their hands or paws  
or anything they've got now

Singing would always be followed by prayer. With prayer the Holy Spirit will give the community of faith the power and wisdom to act and move through the seemingly insurmountable barriers that are on the way to a multicultural community.

The following is a sample of our prayers:

Blessed is our God  
whose very being is diverse  
in the name of the Creator, the Christ and Holy Spirit.  
We thank you for making us in your image  
"yellow, black and white we are precious in your sight"  
Yes, Jesus loves all the children of the world.  
Through the power of your Holy Spirit  
help us this day to break down the barriers  
that keep us from loving  
those that are different than ourselves. Amen.

After handing out the course syllabus a book list was given to the students. See the Appendix for this list. Included in the list was a study book published by the United Methodist Church in 1996 titled, *First, We Must Listen: Living in a Multicultural Society*, by Anne Leo Ellis. Though it was not required reading for the class I used it as a resource.

Through a collection of articles and conversations,  
vignettes and speeches, the book reveals the pilgrimages  
and frank opinions of people from a wide spectrum of

ethnic and racial groups. Sometimes disturbing, often moving and always thought-provoking, their voices provide abundant material for dialogue and action as parishioners take steps to nurture the diversity within their own churches and communities. (Ellis, back cover)

As a way of introduction to the topic we explored the meaning of the term "multiculturalism." A paper was handed out with the following definition:

### MULTICULTURALISM

Where there exists two or more cultures in relationship with one another. Such a relationship can exist on a global scale, or on a national scale, in a community, in an institution, in a family and within an individual.

This relationship can be positive where all people respect each other's culture or negative where one culture attempts to dominate over other cultures.

This relationship can also be constructive where those of one culture actually invest time and energy to learn about the cultures of others and thereby, to some degree, the individuals themselves become multicultural.

The class was asked to comment on this definition of multiculturalism and to offer their own understanding of the term. We then offered examples of different multicultural relationships that we have experienced or observed in society. I asked them to think about multiculturalism in terms of the Church. What examples have they seen of a multicultural church either at the denomination level or at the local level.

We then looked at the pros and cons of a multicultural congregation and I posed the following questions for discussion:

1. What benefits do you think there are from a multicultural congregation?
2. What drawbacks do you think there are from a multicultural congregation?
3. What benefits do you think there are from an ethnic congregation?
4. What drawbacks do you think there are from an ethnic congregation?

The class began to think about their own situation as an ethnic congregation and reflected on the benefits it offered for mission. They also began to articulate the ways that their ethnic identity as a congregation kept "others" from participating in their church. They talked about the ways a multicultural identity might help their congregation to grow in numbers since they exist in an increasingly multicultural neighborhood. Some people said that they would lose some members who come to Melrose because it is an ethnic congregation. Some members do not want a multicultural/multiracial congregation, they implied.

At the end of the class two questionnaires dealing with the topic of prejudice and racism were handed out for homework. *The Racism in Action and Personal Inventory Questionnaire* are from Ellis' book, *First, We Must Listen*. Both of these questionnaires help people reflect on their own attitudes about race.

Our second session began with a discussion about the meaning of the terms prejudice and racism. We looked at the following definitions from *Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, made comments, offered other definitions, and gave examples from our own experiences and observations.

## PREJUDICE

1. An unfavorable opinion or feeling formed beforehand and without knowledge, thought or reason.

2. Any preconceived opinion or feeling, either favorable or unfavorable.
3. Unreasonable feeling, opinions or attitudes, especially of a hostile nature, directed against a racial, religious or national group.

### RACISM

1. A belief that human races have distinctive characteristics that determine their respective cultures, usually involving the idea that one's own race is superior and has the right to rule others.
2. A policy of enforcing such asserted right.
3. A system of government and society based upon it.

Next, we looked at the two questionnaires the class did for homework. People were asked to pair off and share their responses with one another. After coming back as a group they were invited to share some of their particular responses with the entire class. Several people mentioned the prejudices of their parents and how their own attitude today is different than that of their parents. People also gave examples of their own experiences of racism. We also confessed ways that we have been prejudiced toward others; however, it was hard for any of us to admit that we were racist.

I asked the class to ponder why it is that our congregation finds it so very hard to be in mission in our multicultural neighborhood, especially among African Americans. The general response was that when the church has tried outreach programs in the neighborhood, the neighbors, particularly African Americans, have shown no interest in responding. What the congregation perceived as an apathetic response has confirmed for them that people of different cultures and races just want to be by themselves.

In the second half of the class I handed out a page titled, *Questionnaire for the Members of Melrose United Methodist Church*. The class spent sometime filling it out and then we spent the rest of the class discussing people's responses. You will find this questionnaire in the Appendix.

The question I stressed most was number 8: What is your level of tolerance of multicultural relations?

- a. Internationally
- b. Nationally
- c. Locally
- d. Institutionally (job related, clubs, the church)
- e. Family (for yourself or for others)
- f. Intermarriage (for yourself or for others)

Some of the members of the class shared that their acceptance of multicultural relations had limitations. They may be open to a multicultural society for the United States but were not sure of a multicultural society for the Philippines. Others made the point that the Filipinos, with their many tribal and regional groups are already multicultural. Most said that they would be open to their children marrying persons from other cultures or races. I did not push these individuals to say publicly whether that opinion was limited to certain cultures or races.

Social and economic class are usually factors. Although it was not in the questionnaire I brought these dynamics into our discussion. A lack of response told me that people felt uncomfortable sharing their opinions in the classroom vis-a-vis social and economic class and race. I wondered if some people would be more open to multicultural and multiracial relations in the church, even in the family and in marriage, if the social and/or economic class of the other

person was higher than their own.

For session three we watched part of a video titled, *The Color Fear* (1995), by Lee Mun Wah. This video documents several discussions on culture and race carried on by a half dozen men from various ethnic groups while on a retreat together. The discussions included times of personal sharing of pain and anger. It was intended to be thought provoking for the class which was asked to carry on their own discussion about the film and share their personal feelings for the last twenty minutes of class. There are many videos available today on the topic of multiculturalism, race and diversity that are thought-provoking.

As class ended a list of the other twelve United Methodist congregations in Oakland was distributed with the invitation to visit one of these churches the next week (ten were ethnic churches, one white, and the other two multiethnic churches). I understood that the request to visit another church would bring anxiety to some people and for this reason I suggested going to a fellow United Methodist church. The instructions were simply to attend the Sunday worship service and watch, listen and try to appreciate the differences and similarities with our own Sunday morning program.

When I came back for the fifth session people were asked to share their experiences visiting other churches during the previous weeks. I was surprised that out of a class of twenty-five adults not one individual went to another church. We spent half of the class discussing why. Everyone had their own excuse from not wanting to reduce the attendance in our own church service to admitting that the request produced such great anxiety that they simply could not get themselves to visit another ethnic church. In the end I asked if people were willing to give it one more try and most of the class agreed. We postponed the Bible Study scheduled for the following week in order for people to try one more time to visit another church.

During the second half of the fifth session we looked at case studies from six



United Methodist churches in Oakland. The studies were based on interviews that I had with the pastors of these churches but they were written from my point of view. Each study tries to give an explanation for the cultural and racial identity of the particular church. These case studies can be found in the Appendix.

The class was split into six groups, each taking a case study to discuss among themselves. People in the groups were asked to give their impression of each church based on the brief paragraph. If this church were near their home and they were of the same ethnic background as the majority in the church would they visit? As Filipino United Methodists would they visit this church?

The first case study is actually based on the history of Melrose United Methodist Church. The group that looked at this study had the opportunity to reflect on my impression of our church. Several people from the group were not comfortable with my description. They did not see their church having any responsibility to be of service to the African American community. They were of the opinion that there were African American churches to be of service to African Americans in our neighborhood. According to them Melrose UMC is a regional church serving the Filipino community in the East Bay and not a neighborhood church. It says this in our mission statement. They understand their challenge is to invite Filipinos to Melrose to help the church grow.

At the start of the sixth session those who had visited other churches the week before were given the opportunity to share their experiences. Only three couples did the assignment but others commented from earlier experiences they had of visiting ethnic churches. The reluctance of the majority in the class to visit other ethnic churches led me to believe that these individuals were either not interested in having a crosscultural experience with other United Methodists or they were strongly opposed to the idea. Through the years I have observed that far more of our members will participate in programs with other

Filipino United Methodist churches than in programs sponsored by other ethnic United Methodist churches or multicultural programs organized by the district with United Methodists from various churches.

Our Bible study was based on a list of scriptures from both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. The list is titled, *Biblical References to the Topic of Multiculturalism*, and can be found in the Appendix. We only had enough time to make an overview of the scriptures in this first session of Bible study. For homework the class was asked to read the scriptures in the list again, to write down their thoughts, and add other scriptures to the list that they thought either supported or opposed the idea of multiculturalism.

In our seventh session we looked at those scriptures that individuals particularly wanted to discuss. Since we were a Methodist group I reminded the class of John Wesley's quadrilateral in discerning God's will: scripture as primary, then tradition, experience and reason. These resources can help Christians determine the importance of multicultural and multiracial relations in their lives.

Our eighth session dealt with the topic of diversity in our lives. My spouse, Yuri Morita, who was at this time a professional diversity trainer at the University of California, was invited to lead the session. You may wish to ask professionals in your community who work in the field of multicultural relations and diversity to lead this session.

Ms Morita asked people to reflect on their own experiences of diversity in their lives. This led people to see that diversity is seen in other ways besides national culture and race. Not only did many of the Filipinos admit that they were a diverse people but families acknowledged the diversity even among family members.

The class was also asked to think about the strengths that human diversity gives to the state of California. Not only did people mention the inflow of new

ideas as a plus but there was definitely an appreciation of the variety of foods available through our many ethnic restaurants. But underlying the positive results of California's diversity was some anxiety stemming from the impression that the state was becoming too diverse.

Using the demographic information from her book, *Diversity Awareness Training Guide*, Ms Morita introduced to the class facts about California's changing population. She asked the class to form small groups to discuss the following questions:

- Group 1 How is this demographic change affecting the State of California economically, politically, socially and educationally? How is it effecting church denominations, particularly the United Methodist Church in California?
- Group 2 How is this demographic change affecting the scope of your job, your personal life and how you understand your mission as Christians?
- Group 3 What kind of efforts are being made in your community to respond to the effects of California's demographic change? How is your local church responding to the needs of the community?

The groups were asked to share the outcome of their discussions with the class as a whole. Participants were invited to comment on each group's report.

In closing, people were invited to share ideas on how they could be more open to people who were different, not only of different cultures and races, but also of different economic classes, religions, sexual orientations, physical and mental abilities.

Ms Morita offered several interpersonal and social communicational skills:

**Display of Respect:** The ability to express respect and positive regard for another person is an important component in interpersonal relations. The expression of respect can be expected to confer status upon the recipient and contribute to his or her self-esteem.

**Interaction Posture:** The ability to respond to others in a descriptive, nonevaluative, non-judgemental, and non-argumentative way is especially helpful when first relating to persons who are different than you.

**Orientation of Knowledge:** Different people explain themselves and the world around them in different terms. Some people tend to assume that their own knowledge, values and perceptions are valid for everyone. Presumably, the less a person understands and accepts the fact that knowledge is individual in nature, the more difficulty he or she will have adjusting to people who are different, whose views of what is "true" or "right" are likely to be quite different from his or her own.

**Empathy:** Some people are apparently better able than others to infer and, in turn, project a reasonably accurate sense of another's thoughts, feelings, and/or experiences, while others may lack the interest and/or skill to do so. The capacity to "put oneself in another's shoes," or to behave as if one could, is important to the development and maintenance of positive human relationships.

**Tolerance for Ambiguity:** The ability to react to new and ambiguous situations with minimal discomfort has long been thought to be an important asset when relating to people who are different or adjusting to a new culture. Excessive discomfort resulting from being placed in a new or different environment, or from finding a familiar environment altered in some critical ways, can lead to confusion, frustration and hostility. Some people seem better able than others to adapt well in new environments and adjust quickly to the

demands of a changing milieu. Presumably such skills can be crucial for living in a multicultural society where change and novelty are perhaps the only constants.

## Evaluation

Those who came to this course on multiculturalism were very gracious to their pastor. If I had asked the congregation for a list of topics for a two month Sunday School class I doubt that they would have chosen this one, but the church knew that this was part of my Doctor of Ministry dissertation and they wanted to support me. They came out in droves for the first two sessions but I think this had more to do with the fact that we organized early morning breakfasts on these first two Sundays. This always works to get people to come to Sunday School.

I should not have been surprised that people struggled with my proposal to visit other churches. Perhaps we should have arranged a group visit rather than individuals or couples being asked to go by themselves. We talked about the possibility of a group from our church going to San Francisco's Glide Memorial Church and experience their multicultural congregation. People seemed to like this idea better. We also came up with the idea of doing a joint worship service with another ethnic congregation, or one of our groups, like the young adults choir, visiting another church and participating by singing an anthem. We could have tried either one of these options for experiencing other ethnic congregations.

Those who like Bible study felt that we could have spent many weeks exploring the scriptural bases for multiculturalism. Our course allowed time for only a general overview of relevant scriptures and in depth study of a few. A Sunday School class called Multiculturalism and the Bible could be offered in

addition to this course.

A more extensive course could have been offered based on one or more of the books in the suggested reading list. During the course I brought people's attention to several of the brief essays in the book, *First, We Must Listen*, but I would recommend using the entire book with the Leader's Guide either as the bases for a course on multiculturalism or as a supplement to a more extensive study of the subject. This book was used throughout the United Methodist Church as part of the United Methodist Women's School of Missions in 1996.

Although a lot of people came to my Sunday School class to listen to their pastor talk on the topic of multiculturalism, and many participated in the discussions, it was my observation that most of the class members were not particularly passionate about this subject. After the course there was no further discussion among the leaders and no proposals to the Administrative Council to assist our local church in becoming more multicultural. The course may have helped people think about the possibility of a multicultural congregation, but generally, the members of Melrose are content with their church being predominantly Filipino, and described as an ethnic church.

### Suggested Books on Multiculturalism

*Coming Together: The Biblical Message in an Age of Diversity*, by Curtiss Paul DeYoung, Judson Press, 1995.

*First We Must We Listen: Listening in a Multicultural Society*, by Anne Leo Ellis, Friendship Press, 1996.

*First We Must Listen: Listening in a Multicultural Society*, (Leaders Guide), by Marilyn Winters, Friendship Press, 1996.

*From Every Nation Without Number*, by Roy Sano, Abingdon Press, 1982.

*Raising the Rainbow Generation: Teaching your Children to be Successful in a Multicultural Society*, by Dr. Darlene Powell Hopson and Dr. Derek Hopson, Simon and Shuster, 1993.

*We are the Church Together: Cultural Diversity in Congregational Life*, by Charles Foster and Theodore Breisford, Trinity Press, 1996.

## Appendix

### Questionnaire for the Members of Melrose United methodist Church

1. I joined Melrose UMC because  
(You may choose more than one)
  - a. It is in a multicultural neighborhood.
  - b. The building is shared by three different ethnic congregations.
  - c. The pastor is not Filipino
  - d. The congregation is predominantly Filipino.
2. What advantages are there (if any) in having a pastor who is not Filipino?
3. What advantages are there (if any) in having a pastor who is Filipino?
4. What is your reaction to Filipinos who just want a Filipino church and to be in ministry only to Filipinos?
5. Should our church be identified as a congregation in ministry to only Filipinos or should we be intentional about being a multicultural church?

6. Should the Church of Jesus Christ be multicultural?
  - a. Worldwide
  - b. Nationally
  - c. Denominationally
  - d. At the local church level
7. Would you still come to Melrose UMC if it became multicultural?
8. What is your level of tolerance of multicultural and multiracial relations?  
(You may choose more than one)
  - a. Internationally
  - b. Nationally
  - c. Locally
  - d. Institutionally (job related, clubs, the church)
  - e. Family
  - f. Inter marriage
9. Should the United States become increasingly multicultural where every culture and language is recognized with equal value?
10. Should the Philippines become increasingly multicultural where every culture and language is recognized with equal value?
11. What do you think of the possibility that when society becomes multicultural that future generations begin to lose the distinctive characteristics of their original culture and a new culture develops where there is a mix of various cultures?
12. What do you think of interracial and crosscultural marriages? Does it concern you that there would be an increasing number of persons from Filipino ancestry who are not "pure" Filipino?



## Case Studies

### Case Study 1

In a major city the demographics change where a white congregation has existed for decades. Little if any attempt is made to be in ministry to African American people who are moving into the neighborhood, or to invite them to participate in the church. Aware that the membership has been dwindling for some time, the District Superintendent invites a Filipino American congregation to share the building with the white congregation. Eventually this group merges with the white congregation and within a decade there are no more white people. Most of the Filipino Americans commute to the church from other neighborhoods and even other cities.

### Case Study 2

An African American congregation in a city that is multicultural creates a mission statement that identifies its ministry as Afrocentric. The church would never exclude people from other races or cultures but is not apologetic about its Afrocentric style of worship. Persons from other races and cultures are welcome to join this church, but they need to adapt to the Afrocentric style of doing things, and accept the fact that the church's mission resources are directed to the needs of the African American community.

### Case Study 3

A predominantly white congregation in a predominantly white neighborhood of a multicultural city sees itself as a parish church. It would never exclude people from other races but makes no attempt to be multicultural. Its pastor is not apologetic about the fact that the church reflects the demographics of the neighborhood. She would be open to the congregation becoming more multicultural, but she does not see people of different races and cultures driving to their neighborhood to attend their church in the near future.

#### Case Study 4

A church that is recently the product of two merged white congregations in a multicultural city has its first ethnic pastor, a Hispanic women. The congregation has not made a mission statement to declare its intention to be multicultural, but it is clearly multicultural. The members are not against a multicultural church if it happens, but they invest little time or energy to bring this about. Some members might oppose a multicultural church if the white members began to be a minority in the church and they lose their positions of influence and power.

#### Case Study 5

A white congregation was nearly dead in a neighborhood that was becoming increasingly multicultural and multiracial. A young white pastor that had a history of social activism was appointed to this church and within ten years transformed the church into a vital multicultural and multiracial congregation. The congregation has a mission statement that identifies itself as multicultural and the members are intentional about creating such a community. They pride themselves in being a racially mixed group where the various cultures are valued and celebrated in worship. Their outreach ministry is clearly to all people in the neighborhood.

#### Case Study 6

A Japanese American congregation merged with a white congregation in the 1960s with the intentions of being a multicultural community church. The two congregations made a written covenant to declare their intention but in reality they merged like water and oil. Within ten years there were no more white people and the Japanese Americans simply remained an ethnic church. They were always identified as an ethnic church by the United Methodist Conference. The congregation has never reached clarity about its identity or mission. Some think that the church ought to be a multicultural church in ministry to the neighborhood and others see themselves as a Japanese

American congregation primarily in ministry to Japanese Americans in the region.

## Biblical References for the Topic of Multiculturalism

### Hebrew Scriptures

Genesis 1:27	Man created in God's image
Genesis 9:18–27	Noah's curse on Canaan
Genesis 10	Nations descended from Noah
Genesis 11	Tower of Babel
Exodus 22:21	You were once strangers
Leviticus 19:33–34	Treat the stranger as native
Deuteronomy 10:19	Love the sojourner
Joshua	Anti-foreigner narrative
Book of Ruth	Openness to multicultural family
Isaiah 43	God's people from all places
Jonah	God vs. anti-foreign attitude

### New Testament

Matthew 5:43–45	Love your enemies
Matthew 22:35–40	Love God and neighbor
Matthew 28:19	Make disciples of all nations
Mark 7:24–30	Syrophenician woman
John 4:1–41	Samaritan women
Luke 9:51–56	Jesus not received by Samaritan
Luke 10:25–37	Story of the Good Samaritan
John 17:20–21	That they all may be one
Acts 2:8–12	Diverse languages, all understood
Acts 11	Peter's vision of diversity
1 Corinthians 12:12–27	Diversity in the body of Christ
2 Corinthians 5:17–20	New Creation in Christ

## Ministry of reconciliation

Galations 2:11—21

Galations 3:26—28

Ephesians 4:3—6

Ephesians 2:11—22

Philippians 3:4—9

Colossians 3:5—15

James 2:1—9

Revelations 7:9

Revelations 21:1

Revelations 21:5

Peter's refusal to eat with Gentiles

Neither Jew nor Greek

Unity of the Spirit

Breaking down dividing walls

All regarded as loss for Christ

Cloth yourself with a new self

Condemns separation

Diversity in the Church

New heaven and new earth

God makes all things new